

WRITERS MOSAIC

Kam-Bu

in conversation with Colin Grant

Colin Grant: I'm really pleased to be able to speak remotely to Kam-Bu, who's currently in a studio, Derry Studio in Brixton, south London. I've been listening with great pleasure and interest to 'Black on Black', his new single, and also to 'Are You On?' So, welcome to *Writers Mosaic*, Kam-Bu. How are you doing today? What are you doing in the studio?

Kam-Bu: Good morning. Today I'm going to be in with Alex Parish. I haven't met him before, but I think it's going to be a good day. Sun's out... can't complain. It's my job. I love it, so... we'll see... Just been writing.

CG: Well, it's great to be able to do what you love, but that's taken a little bit of time to come to fruition, I suppose... but you've been at this game for quite some time, since you were a teenager, is that right?

K-B: Yeah, that's correct. I've been doing this for a long time. Well, it seems like a long time... but well over a decade.

CG: And did you grow up in Brixton? Is that right?

K-B: Well, no. I lived here for a little bit when I was younger, but my family are originally from Nottingham. That's where my grandparents moved to, migrated

to, when they came to England. So, we lived there for a little bit and then my dad moved to Brixton. We were the only family from Nottingham to move down here, so we kind of lost all of our connections and support system; and then it was just us down here. But Brixton was great. We lived here for a little bit and then we moved to south-west after a couple of years.

CG: How would you characterise or describe your time culturally in Brixton?

K-B: I think it was perfect culturally. It was great, I don't know. It seemed – maybe because I was younger and it just seems nostalgic – but I think the contrast from Brixton to south-west, it's not in my mind. Brixton was great growing up. It was nice to have more fellow Jamaicans, Caribbean people. Having all the food that we love, the vibes, the music. It just felt like it was buzzing all of the time and, of course, there was stuff going wrong. But there was always something to do and people felt a sense of community. There was always different people at the house or we were going to other people's houses, so we had a community for real.

CG: And what were you listening to? I mean, I've read that your father would be playing Dr Dre and people like that. What were you listening to growing up?

K-B: Yeah, well whatever my dad had basically, because before I had any pocket money, or anything like that, it was the CDs and cassettes in the house. So, a lot of the stuff was reggae and there was some rap in there as well. And then my mum would play various other artists and she was more on the female side: Luther Vandross and Anita Baker and all of that sort of soulful stuff. So, I was just playing whatever. When I was allowed to go to Woolworths and HMV, sometimes I was getting treated and I was allowed to pick what I wanted. It might be like Gorillaz or Eminem – I was a big Eminem fan back in the day – or Dizzee Rascal.

CG: How did you move from appreciating listening to music to begin to start to play the music yourself... to begin to start writing songs? How did that come about?

K-B: I had this Fisher-Price toy where you could record demos on top of it, on top of cassettes. So, you could play a cassette, rewind it and record on top of it. It was quite a cool little toy and I used to mess around with that. First, I was just memorising the lyrics of songs. So, you know how you used to get on the cassette, you'd have the song, then you'd have the instrumental and then there would be a remix... So, on the instrumental version, I would just copy what they were saying and then try and add my own little stuff to it. And I guess as time went on, I sort of figured out, like maybe I could do this. I wanted to get good at rapping. And everyone also had a few little lyrics back in the day – I think that comes from that culture in Jamaica of toasting – and everyone had a little rhythm. My dad was playing drums – even when we was in the car, he would just be beating the steering wheel and then it was just like someone was going to freestyle or something and it was just constantly... It's like music is a sort of heartbeat around my family and I think it just came naturally.

CG: For those who don't understand what toasting is, can you explain it? It's like talking over a record, isn't it?

K-B: Yeah, yeah. So, toasting is probably the origins of rap basically. It's like when Jamaicans or other Caribbean islands were holding parties, there would be the records being played and then a system and then there would be a man on the sound system, sort of what you would call a DJ, and then he would say some stuff like, not even too much really, he might just say, 'Have a good night.' And then he's trying to flow on top of the beat. And then as time went on, people started getting more skilled with it and just becoming part of the song. That's basically toasting.

CG: Can you remember, or can you track back, you're still a young man, but can you track back to a time when you maybe had written something of your own and were prepared to share it with friends and relations? Can you remember what that would have been?

K-B: Probably around, I can't remember specifically what I said, but it would have been around the age of 14 or 13. It was probably okay for that time, and everyone probably thought it was good, and I thought it was good, but I couldn't tell you what it was, no way.

CG: But it sounds like you've had a good pedigree of music in the background of your life, and one of the things I love about your writing, and in these songs that I've heard and seen the videos of, is that there's a kind of conscious lyric writing strand to it. Is that important to you that you have that consciousness when you're writing and have some purpose to the writing beyond entertainment?

K-B: Yeah, definitely. I think I figured that out at a very young age. Well, when I first started out and was like, 'Okay. I'm going to the youth club now, I'm going to the studio,' and there's guys in the studio... olders that were just killing it and going absolutely ham and just being so much better than me and I looked up to them, but at the same time, I wouldn't be able to say what they're saying because I'm not living the life that they're living and I think when I was experimenting, trying to find my sound and my direction, I found that the records that were not as true to me were way harder to write and I didn't enjoy writing them. But everything that I've experienced and gone through, it just came naturally and that's when I just chose to follow my heart and I think people enjoy the humility in my lyrics and my songs when I'm writing something. And that's kind of what I chase after, and I appreciate that in so many different artists. And then once you've listened to a

bunch of records that are like that, you can kind of say there's a space to be honest and be yourself, and that's where the name Kam-Bu also came from.

CG: So, yeah... can we dig into that a little bit? So, it's spelt Kam-Bu, but it could be Can B U: 'it could be you'. Is that what you mean?

K-B: Yeah. Well, it could be you. You can *be* you and you should always be *you*. My name is Camron. That's how it's spelled, but there's already a rapper named Cam'ron, so I couldn't go there, so the B U part is perfect really.

CG: That's really lovely actually. That reminds me of when I was about your age. I went up to the Isle of Arran one New Year's Eve and we were on this quite deserted place. We were renting a house from these people who lived next door and they invited us over for drinks on New Year's Eve. And the man, I'll never forget what he said to me, because I was going through, I don't know, trying to find my way in life, and he said to me, 'Never lose the taste of yourself.' And I think that's quite an important thing to think about – how you can be true to yourself. That seems to be the case in your writing, so all power to you for that. Is that important to you when you're writing, to get a sense that you'll be close to your truth?

K-B: Yeah, I think that's where it all comes from. Before I start a song, I listen to the instrumental and kind of just figure out the emotions that it's making me feel, the colours that I'm seeing in my mind when I close my eyes, and wherever those emotions come from, that's where I try to draw from. But it's also like, in my songs, and the more I release, you'll understand this, I'm not perfect, I'm just a human being. So part of being yourself is: it's not just a good day, it's not always going to be a good day. It's kind of like therapy, in a way, when you're really on a journey of finding yourself. You're gonna discover things about yourself that you don't like.

There's going to be patterns you realise that you do, and you're going to have to check yourself on them and that's kind of the stuff that I'm just putting out in my music; and if people enjoy it then that's a plus of course. That's kind of where it all stems from and it seems to be hitting and doing what it's supposed to be. I'm not going to be stopping doing that anytime soon.

CG: Good. No, keep on, keep on brother! Can I focus on one or two of your songs now? The song that I've most recently heard and seen is 'Black on Black', which is a phrase that is bandied about in the public domain, in journalism, in newspapers and it has a negative connotation, but you've tried to wrest the title away from that negative connotation, haven't you, with your lyrics? Is that the idea?

K-B: Indeed. Yeah, that was definitely the idea behind 'Black on Black' and the inspiration from Fela Kuti with the repetition of the chorus, and just even the way the track feels itself. It's menacing, it's loud, it's crazy, it's fierce and it's full of passion, and flipping that notion on its head because far too often we hear, 'Okay, Black on Black crime...' First of all, that statement is just incorrect anyway. Everyone from a lower class of people: we all experience the same things no matter where you are. We all experience the same things, so I just wanted to turn that on its head. It's my experience, and what I see, and even why I say, 'Fuck a beef on a postcode', that's how I see it. And 'My mum says she's worried about knife crime/ hood superstars have been paid though'. So, it's like she's worried about these things and this is how I've experienced it, and growing up there wasn't many black role models on television. We didn't have many. Most of our role models, they had the chains, they had the cars and probably weren't doing anything that's completely legit. So, that's kind of my view that I had on it, and I wanted to give my experience on how those things made me feel.

CG: So, when I was thinking about the line in your song, 'Tell young ones to be humble. I promise that our days are coming soon,' it really struck me as the power

of remembrance of a song by Delroy Wilson, who in the 1960s in Jamaica, he wrote a song called 'Better Must Come', which was about better days coming for the impoverished people in Jamaica, now that colonial rule was coming to an end. There is a sense that you are a carrier of the past as well, whether you are conscious of it or not. There are things in you that speak to the past as well.

K-B: Yeah. Wow, that's crazy because people always say, well people have said to me: 'You can hear the ancestors speaking to you through this one'. It's weird, I don't know... I can't say that I'm drawing from them, but when I am, that's what I'm saying. Being true to yourself and who you really are, then these magical things happen; and it's like great that you can hear a song and be like, 'that's what that reminded me of', and that's crazy and that's your experience and that's what I want my music to be like. I don't ever want someone to listen to my song and think, 'I'm telling you this how you should think.' I want you to experience it for yourself and feel how you feel.

CG: I love the fact that you've got your family and your grandad in the video for 'Black on Black', and I've read that you see it as an ode to your grandad on some level. Is that right?

K-B: A hundred per cent. A hundred per cent. I mean like, I wouldn't even be here right now, I wouldn't be sat in this studio talking to you about this, I wouldn't have come across your book. I wouldn't have done it, I wouldn't be here, I wouldn't be who I am right now if it wasn't for my grandad, taking that ship in 1957. So, to get him in there at the age of 92, and he's looking great and he's doing well, and he's such a healthy man, and he was a miner. He's such a strong, strong individual and I pay it: all respects to him for doing what he did and my grandmother too. I can never even gauge what it must have been like to come here with nothing and looking back; then going on to work in a mine. So, I'm lucky.

CG: Yeah, yeah. That's a tough life. They made some big sacrifices, those people who came over like your grandparents. But he does look fly in the movie, and I love there's kind of a gentle humour and an ease with who you think you are and who he is. And I love it when you are in that kind of West Indian front room, with those tropes of West Indian life, with the settee where you wouldn't take off the plastic covering, the doilies and the drinks cabinet. But also, you're drinking a nice cup of tea.

K-B: Yeah. That's the thing, yeah.

CG: I can imagine your grandad doing that as well.

K-B: Yeah, yeah for sure. He might have a Guinness.

CG: He might have a Guinness [*laughing*]. And is it important that your music is relatable to your peers? And I've read a little bit about you where you talked about the fact that there was a time in your life when you were younger, when you were moving in a different direction, away from some of the negative things around you. But even if you were moving in a difficult direction, it's still going to be difficult for you as a young black man in this country.

KBU: Yeah, yeah, yeah. No, definitely. I mean, it's important in a sense because you need to be able to understand what I'm saying. Of course, I read and can be really articulate and make it sound pretty but I'm not a singer at the end of the day. This is my lingo. This is how I talk. Although, when I'm going to articulate, I'm going to sound a bit different to when I'm rapping. Those experiences, for example, like my peers, moving from Brixton to south-west and then, okay, now I'm in the area where there aren't as many black people, and it was never about race because, like I said earlier, when you're from the lower class you will just...

humans always find their group, so I found my peers instantly. And then it got to a point where I was always into my books and whatnot and they were like 'Look', we got to the age of 16 and they were like, 'Look, you can't chill with us anymore. You've got an opportunity to do things.' And I'm like, 'You can do this as well.'

And then you find out and figure out the mindset of behind why they feel like this because they feel like their environment can't change, whereas I always feel like I know I can change my environment. It's just in my mind. You know like, people like Nas and all them hip-hop heads who have kind of preach that knowledge, who have always put that belief in me. So, I just try and put that in my music to let them know that you can do it too. If I can do it, you can do it, kind of thing. It's important to remember where we came from.

My dad was a caretaker on Loughborough Estate when we lived in Brixton and now, he works for Lambeth Council and now we live in south-west. Even though we moved, he didn't take his foot out of that community. Even though some things that happened in that community weren't positive to him, he never gave up, and that's the same thing for me. I'm not going to turn my back on the people who actually made me who I am today.

CG: Good for you. I'm glad to hear that. What books were you influenced by when you were growing up? You mentioned books there. What were you reading as a youngster?

K-B: Yeah, yeah. I think getting older, because when you're younger you read a lot of non-fiction books and some of those, but then again actually *The Alchemist* was a really good one, I really liked that, by Paulo Coelho. That's again, I think I'm a very optimistic person and that book was refreshing. And there was definitely a time in my life where I felt like I needed money, I felt like I needed this to bring some sort of fulfilment, and that book kind of just takes you on a journey of a little boy who is, he's not sure what he's looking for. He might be looking for love, but he comes across so many different people, and he kind of sees that the grass is

greener here. This has this, and that's just perfect for where I was at that time. Also, *The Tipping Point* by Malcolm Gladwell, *The Road Less Travelled* by M. Scott Peck; I really enjoyed that book, because it helped me uncover a lot of the things I might have gone through when I was younger.

Even in *Homecoming*, you know how they talk about things where your mum is really the one who helps you discover those emotions, where your dad is more like really closed off and things like that. I think it's definitely an issue, not really an issue, but part of that culture where you're a man you know, all of these toxic traits you sort of have. And you really need to understand you're not a machine. So, that really helped me as well.

CG: I'm intrigued by your interest in Fela Kuti because I think he's a great performer and his music is fantastic, but sometimes some of the tropes around him and his accent on his masculinity, it's difficult to read sometimes, isn't it? I mean, I love him, even songs like 'I Be No Gentleman', I get it. But some of my female friends are a little bit more guarded about him, shall we say.

K-B: Yeah, yeah. I think in terms of that, what do they say?... 'You have to love the art and not the artist.' I think that's all I can say on that because we're humans you know, and it's controversial. I'm not going to get into it.

CG: No, no, no. Fine, fine. Let's just drill down a little bit into what it is you like about his music and how that has informed the way you write your own music. What is it about Fela Kuti's music that has inspired the kind of music that you want to make?

K-B: Yeah, I mean, I think it's that, well basically, it all started with my dissertation when I was doing music production, and I had been a fan of Fela Kuti. I loved all of his music. I just love how they're long. They're eight minutes and there are no

words for about four minutes, and it's just a journey. You feel like you're on a journey, but it's also the powerful stuff that he was able to do with his music, is what inspired me the most about him.

Similar like Bob Marley, it's just, these guys managed to perfect their art to a point where it's beautiful music and you can have the best time of your life listening to it, and it also has a meaning behind it. That's where my inspiration draws from, those kinds of people. I enjoy the way he does his repetition too because he was such an activist-type person. Even his journey, when he started out, he was doing all of that high-life stuff. He wasn't really catering towards saying something meaningful. He was just on his journey. Again, it's that thing where he's a human and he's going to grow, and I just feel the same way like, as time goes on, I'm going to be able to do something magical, as big as that I hope one day.

CG: Well, I think you're already doing it so all power to you. Just a couple more questions. It strikes me that with your music in songs like 'Black on Black' and 'Are You On?', you're hoping and attempting to change the narrative in the public domain about black people and black youths especially. Do you see your music as a platform to try to interrogate and complicate the usual stories that are told about black men and women?

K-B: For sure. I think now, more than ever, when like 80 per cent of the media is owned by a few people and so on and so forth. There is the platform for me to say something. There's also a platform for me to make music to make people go and have fun, but if a certain record makes me feel a type of way and I feel like I have something to say, I'm always going to say it. That's just me being true to who I am. I don't want... If I have followers and people who respect that, I love that. That's more power to them and more power to me. We can inspire change and I think that is the most important thing that I've learned over the years. You can't change people, you can only inspire them, so that's just how I feel about it.

CG: One reviewer said of your songs: 'The rap was like artillery fire, but it was constructive as well.' Is that a good characterisation, do you think?

K-B: Yeah, it's so important. It's so important, because you can have a message, but you don't want it to get lost in the... Being precise and to the point and finessing it is a real skill, and that same skill that Fela has, that Kendrick has, that Bob Marley has, that Peter Tosh has, is that being able to construct lyrics in a certain way, saying what you need to and getting that passion out, all in one, whilst not making the listener feel that you're intruding on them or being abrasive or anything like that. You know, it's definitely a skill to it, so something that I'm working on all the time.

CG: And finally, I was struck by your use of the word 'singularity', when it comes to the construction of your songs and your music; and I just wondered about whether that singularity is also informed by the kind of Rastafarian ideal of Ital living.

K-B: Yeah, that's a good question. I never thought about it like that. A question like that, your inspiration comes from loads of different things and sometimes they're subconscious though. That could be it. I'm not sure yet. I haven't figured it out, but it's definitely something to think about now. I'll be thinking about that one.

CG: Okay, well you've given us a lot to think about. Thank you very much Kam-Bu for appearing on *Writers Mosaic* and all power to you.

K-B: Thank you for having me. You too man.

CG: I'll be looking forward to the next songs as they come out over the years.

K-B: Awesome man. Thanks for having me.

A recording of this interview can be found at writersmosaic.org.uk

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